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An American's Adjustment to Changing China

J.B. Powell and the Nationalist Revolution, 1925-27

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I. The Conflict: Setting and Background.

All the tension and confusion of panic-stricken, rumor-filled Shanghai of 1927 seemed wedged up within the large, ornate hall housing the annual meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce. The Board of Directors had just laconically recited its resolution requesting the resignation of John Benjamin Powell, charging that his paper, The China Weekly Review, in the critical tone of its editorial comment, "was lending aid to disruptive instead of constructive elements" on questions concerning the "lives, property and general welfare of American citizens in Shanghai." [1]

Powell, the intrepid publisher and editor of the only American-owned journal in that frightened commercial center, rose quickly to his feet to reply. Perhaps struck by the suddenness and apparent futility of the moment, Powell merely questioned briefly the constitutionality of his accusers' motion. In so doing, however, he asserted the belief that The Review expressed the true spirit and intent of American policy toward a rebellious China inflamed by nationalism.

Shortly thereafter, upon hearing the condemnation of his colleagues as they approved the Board's resolution, Powell issued a statement to the press which drove closer to the heart of the conflict. "I believe," he said, "the Chinese have a right to the expression of their views as well as have the Americans, the British or anybody else, and as long as I am engaged in the publication of an American newspaper in Shanghai, it is my intention to give them a square deal along with other nationals interested in the vital questions involved in this part of the world." [2]

The meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce serves to introduce and delineate the rival forces in this conflict. In this meeting, held on the afternoon of April 26, 1927, the opposing elements---long locked

in near exhaustive debate---embraced almost physically in an open, face-to-face collision. This encounter focused in sharp dimensions two years of turbulence and friction not only within China's foreign community but also between that community and the Chinese themselves.

In his response to the American body in Shanghai, Powell advanced certain notions which had become familiar strains in his writing of the two previous years. The legal base from which he proceeded, his intention of giving the Chinese a "square deal," and his claim of a correct interpretation of United States policy in China represent some abiding elements of Powell's thought and approach to the Chinese scene during the acute stages of the Nationalist revolution.

The expression of his ideas is related to his background and experience as an American. He brought with him to China predilections which were the result of the thirty-one years of his life spent in America before going abroad. While the pressure of events and the foreigner's response to them worked to influence and to some extent alter his outlook, he came to maintain an increasingly uncompromising and outspoken conviction in his beliefs.

In the final analysis, Powell was an American who brought to China an American point of view not nurtured amidst the treaty ports on China's perimeters but developed in the midwestern United States during a progressive era marked by reforms in both thought and practice. He arrived in China after the first stirrings of a modern nationalism had been manifested and had made itself felt in Chinese political and social life.

In attempting to apply his home-grown pragmatism to China and its problems, Powell came into contention with the vested interests of the foreign community in Shanghai. This clash proceeded from the fact that the antagonists, once their positions were clearly drawn, started from a different set of assumptions which in-

evitably led them to different conclusions.

The Review reflects not only Powell's basic orientation but also some of the journalistic ideals and ethics he acquired during his educational and professional training. What started as a moderate, if not somewhat conservative, editorial approach to the relevant issues in China wound up as something close to a journalistic crusade. The momentum of this spirit remained with Powell and in the pages of The Review up until the forced suspension of the journal after Pearl Harbor. During the thirties this crusade turned its attention to a severe criticism of Japanese actions in China (a subject beyond the scope of this paper).

By the end of the period under consideration here (1925-27), Powell had emerged as a unique and dissident figure in a foreign community at odds with Chinese nationalism. His was a voice of reason and relative moderation maintaining the essence of certain American suppositions amidst the hysteria which that conflict aroused. At the same time, however, Powell appears as the product of the idealistic, muckraking and somewhat platitudinous school of Missouri journalists who then covered the Chinese scene, applying to Chinese events the oft-times ill-adjusted and inapplicable American liberal position.

In this paper I will treat Powell's biography analytically, placing particular emphasis on his background in America and the environmental conditions which shaped his thinking. After a brief treatment of the Shanghai scene into which he came, this study will deal with the evolution of his response as he analyzed the events and issues engulfing the International Settlement during the height of the Nationalist revolution.

II. J.B. Powell: An Analytical Biography.

a. The Influence of Pragmatism in a Changing America.

John B. Powell was born on the edge of what Henry Steele Commager has termed the watershed of American history, the beginning of an era which heralded the call of agrarian democracy and was marked by revolt and reform in almost every aspect of American life.[3] While he may not have grasped in full the depth of its political, economic, social and philosophical implications, he could hardly have escaped the imprint of its influence and effects on American life and thought.

Powell was born April 18, 1886 on a farm in the town of Palmyra, a predominantly agricultural and cattle-raising community of a little over 1,000 population on the northeastern plains of Missouri.[4] His early environment and formative years were particularly attuned to the dynamic and liberal overtunes of the progressive era ushered in during the 1890's. In his youth, his early schooling and his professional training, Powell was a product of that part of the American terrain which nourished in the Grange and Populist movements the seeds of societal reform and reconstruction.

In broad terms, the concepts and axioms of American pragmatism reflected qualities in the American character which were a result of experience as well as disposition.[5] It reflected the practical idealism and egalitarian spirit which characterized the pioneering individualism and frontier democracy of the Middle West in the nineteenth century. During the attempted rationalization of a maturing American society which followed in the twentieth century, it was articulated by William James and John Dewey.

The pragmatic philosophy of James expressed the individualism of the pioneer who cleared the forests and settled the plains of Missouri in the nineteenth

century and cleared the intellectual path for the progressive movement of the twentieth. It was Dewey who applied its method to the service and remaking of society.

Powell could not help but carry at least the rudiments of this formula with him in his mature years. In its concern for egalitarian principles and the plight of the downtrodden, in its faith in the possibility of reform, and in its open-mindedness towards social and political experiments, the pragmatic approach undoubtedly struck responsive chords in Powell's thinking. He was to find it particularly relevant to the inequalities in Sino-Foreign relations in the 1920's and to the aspirations evoked by Chinese nationalism throughout the course of his stay in China.

During Powell's youth and early adult life, Dewey's philosophical preachings became the guide and conscience of the American people, the stimulus for movements, crusades and reforms; the means for curing an ailing society. The force of this intellectual ferment carried with it practical consequences which were no less far-reaching in their magnitude nor less forceful in the example they set for dealing with the problems of twentieth century society.

Much of the leadership for, and the experimentation in, reforms came from the states.[6] In this respect Missouri was no exception. The centralizing tendencies of business and the political corruption which wrought social abuses common to most of the nation were mirrored in Powell's immediate environment. Indeed, in Missouri, the years 1905-17 were marked by the adoption of anti-trust and social reform laws and the enactment of political measures which provided for direct legislation by initiative and referendum. These steps were paralleled in the political attitudes and preferences of Missourians of this time. Missouri Democrats supported reform candidates while many Missouri Republicans swung to the Theodore Roosevelt wing of their party and behind Roosevelt's

Bull Moose Party in 1912.[7]

There were two additional developments in this period, which Commager discusses, which deserve mention in providing the environmental framework within which Powell grew. One, the veneration for and sanctity of a legal tradition long upheld in America was broadened by a whole body of progressive legal thought. The importance of sociological jurisprudence was established with the Brandeis Brief of 1908 which expanded the purview of the law. Moreover, American enthusiasm for and confidence in the power of the law as an instrument to preserve peace and control international relations was demonstrated in the Open Door proclamations, the various declarations and agreements for the preservation of the integrity of China, and the Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs.

Two, this period marks a turning point in Americans' own self-image. It was a time of increasing national self-consciousness. The Spanish-American war in 1898 made the United States a world power. It emerged not only dominant in the Carribean but, unexpectedly, with a power stake in the Pacific. In this era, America began to assume a significant share of the "white man's burden," acquired a world outlook, and focused on the Far East as the prime object of its "mission."[8]

No less important for the purposes of this study is the great transition in journalism which accompanied these changes. The 1890's produced both the best and worst features that came to dominate the newspaper medium for the next half-century.[9] In this era the American newspaper came of age, both in the expanding influence it exerted and the widening scope of its attention, and in the role it played in public life.

What is more important to note here is that in the period 1890-1920 the sense of social responsibility was etched deeply into the code of the press. Reform cru-

sading was a prominent feature of the journalism of the time and the years 1902-12 became known as the "muckraking" era.[10] There emerged a young, rebellious and realisitic generation which became the literary and journalistic spokesman of the progressive movement. While the intensity of this crusading eventually waned, it left in its trail a more sensitive, more keenly aware, and more publically-minded press and literature.

This was the spiritual milieu, the social environment and the professional model which surrounded Powell as he was first a student, and then a teacher, in a Missouri country school; a business college undergraduate and practicing journalist; and finally a student and instructor in the University of Missouri School of Journalism.[11]

b. Growing Up in Missouri: Educational and Professional Training.

Following a country school primary education, Powell went to Quincy, Illinois (fourteen miles away) where he worked his way through high school and business college by carrying two newspaper routes, morning and evening. It is not known whether or not this early, if expedient, exposure to the newspaper world determined his future aspirations, but that he had set his course early is evidenced by the fact that later he worked as a cub reporter on the old Quincy Whig to earn enough money to pay his fare to Columbia, Missouri, where he enrolled in the University of Missouri's new journalism school.[12]

The school, established under Dean Walter Williams in 1908, was the first separate school of journalism to be formed in the country.[13] It reflected an early sense of responsibility and mission in the newspaper field by enterprising midwestern newspapermen. This progressive leadership ~~later~~ produced, in 1910, the adoption by Kansas editors of the first of the codes of ethics which later

became fairly common among state press associations.[14]

At the "new" school, Powell and his fellow students were infused with a working motto worthy of the visionaries who sought to elevate the craft to a professional respectability. It is perhaps of value to note the final paragraph of Williams' "The Journalist's Creed," which provided the philosophical base for the teaching of operational skills and techniques. It serves not only as an interesting index to the thinking of the period, but also to those journalistic ethics and ideals which influenced Powell's thinking as a working newspaperman. It is indeed remarkable how <u>appropos</u> many of its maxims seemed to be just a few years later:[15]

> "I believe that the journalism which succeeds best---and best deserves success---fears God and honors man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power, constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers but always unafraid; is quickly indignant of injustice; is unswayed by the clamor of the mob; seeks to give every man a chance, and as far as law and honest wage and recognition of human brotherhood can make it so, an equal chance; is profoundly patriotic while sincerely promoting international goodwill and cementing world comradeship; is a journalism of humanity, of and for today's world."

As a man, Powell was to display great emotional intensity, lofty ideals and a courageous integrity. As a student, he could hardly fail to be moved and impressed by such ~~eloquence~~ rhetoric.

After his graduation in 1910, Powell returned to northeastern Missouri to work on the <u>Hannibal Courier-Post</u>..